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The Winter of a Man Who Loved the Heat

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When angry demonstrators sacked the American embassy in Tripoli in 1979, a worried friend cabled former CIA agent Edwin P. Wilson in the Libyan capital: "Get out of there. It's getting too hot."

"The bell with you," Wilson shot back. "It's just getting interesting."

The retort struck the note of pride, self-confidence and machismo that marked the Wilson style, say some who knew him when he was a spy.

Now that the good days are gone for Wilson, old acquaintances are searching for clues to what went wrong. At 54, the 6-foot 4-inch former agent is stoop-shouldered, his skin sallow from lack of sunshine, his hair fully gray. He appears to have lost weight, thanks, says defense lawyer Patrick M. Wall, to his tough, new life behind bars.

It has been a long fall from grace—from CIA covert operative and naval intelligence officer, to alleged arms and explosives supplier for Libyan ruler Muammar Qaddafi's international terrorists. Wilson was arrested last June in New York after committing a fundamental error of espionage tradecraft—he trusted the wrong man.

Once known to colleagues as a loyal American agent eager to infiltrate hostile governments, Wilson today is in deep trouble with the country he professed to love. Twice convicted in recent months, he faces 32 years in prison for his Libyan dealings. He won acquittal here March 4 on two murder conspiracy counts—a partial settling of scores with federal prosecutors, whom he has denounced bitterly. But the victory may be short-lived.

Wilson is scheduled to be tried again soon in New York on charges he conspired—with his son Erik, 22—to have two assistant U.S. attorneys and seven other people assassinated.

It is that allegation that most troubles friends who say they believe, or want to believe, Wilson's claim that a secret motive involving national security lay behind his activities in North Africa.

"I loved the guy," says Howard E. Wickham, president of a Washington graphics firm and the best man at Wilson's wedding in the late 1950s. "But if some of these recent revelations are true—Jesus..."

Unlike the old days, when he was "jovial" and a "fun person," according to a friend, Wilson the prisoner has kept silent. He has yet to take the witness stand, except briefly in an Alexandria hearing last month at which he refused to testify. He sits at the defense table, sometimes whispering to his lawyers, frequently taking notes or doodling, and arching thick, black eyebrows that appear—perhaps unfortunately—sinister.

Wickham says he attended part of Wilson's trial last fall in Alexandria as a show of support for his old friend. "Hi, buddy," said Wilson, John Wayne-style, as he was led down a corridor in handcuffs.

Wilson has spoken out in public only once in the 10 months since his arrest—an angry, contemptuous, six-page statement released by his lawyer the day after Wilson's conviction on explosives-smuggling charges in Houston.

"I have been silent much too long," the broadside began. It then lashed out at the Justice Department and the CIA for what Wilson called leaks to the press "orchestrated with perfect timing" to influ-

is to influence and sway public opinion throughout the world. They are experts in this field," Wilson wrote.

"...I have been cut off from people and held in solitary, treated like an animal..." he added.

Prosecutors acknowledge Wilson lost his visitor and telephone privileges and was placed in isolation after he was taped allegedly trying to arrange the murders of Assistant U.S. Attorneys E. Lawrence Barcella Jr. and Carol Bruce from his New York jail cell last fall.

"He's a mover, a guy who sleeps four or five hours a night, a guy who doesn't sit around for a month or two waiting to see what's going to happen," says one federal agent familiar with the government's five-year investigation of Wilson's alleged dealings abroad.

It was typical of Wilson, the same agent says, to become so embroiled in his business deals and maneuverings that he would throw away caution while talking on an open telephone line.

"He'd start out cautious on a phone line he suspected was tapped [by the Libyans]," says the agent, describing the way Wilson would issue orders to employees [many of whom had code names] from his villa in Tripoli. "Then he'd wind up saying, 'I want this stuff delivered right now,' and pounding the desk."

The image of Wilson as a wheeler-dealer—"consumed by greed," as one prosecutor put it—was bolstered by a former employe, the late Kevin P. Mulcahy, in recently released testimony before a Washington federal grand jury investigating Wilson and his onetime business partner, Francis E. Terpil.

"Frank is more—he's an excitement, adventure-oriented guy," said Mulcahy. "Ed is a very cold, down-to-earth, bread and butter—he's a money man. He lives, breathes and